

CHAPTER XI: Overview of NCCAM

Introduction to NCCAM

Thank you very much, Donna, for a very gracious introduction. I do have a very interesting job. A job which in many ways is represented a change of directions for me, but has me thinking about a variety of kinds of science that I think are very important to place in a public health context. So I'm very glad to have all of you activated to think about them. I'd like to let you hear something about how we're thinking about them at the NIH, and then I think we'll have 15 minutes or so for discussion and your input.

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine was created a little more than 10 years ago because of substantial recognition by some of the leading champions for biomedical research in the NIH, but there were some quirky ideas that were outside the mainstream, but that nonetheless should be looked at. The language that created us specified lots of things about what we should do. Specified that we should have an outreach program, specified the composition of our advisory counsel. Interestingly enough, the one thing we didn't do is define complementary and alternative medicine. And so that is in fact one of our ongoing challenges and there is not, in fact, a clear definition, because many ideas come from native healing practices or non-mainstream sources and gradually move into the mainstream. Many health practices are outside the mainstream in some countries and some cultures and part of the mainstream in others. And in fact the very rich traditional health practices such as traditional Chinese medicine and ayurvedic medicine, were for many centuries the dominant health practice in their cultures. So there isn't an easy way to draw this line, but it's a very interesting process to think about and one that I think deserves kind of this big picture perspective.

So just a little bit about us. NIH budget at the year we made this was 29 billion, it's now going to I guess about 31 billion, NCCAM's budget last year was 128 million, so you can see we are in fact a tiny sliver of the overall NIH budget. Nonetheless this is a lot of money, and in fact it is the largest investment by any industrial country in this kind of research. So we take very seriously the challenge of trying to make sure this money is well spent. We think it is. It's very hard to get grants from us, we have the lowest success rate at the NIH, it's an extremely competitive process. All the grants we fund are vigorously peer reviewed either at the Center for Scientific Review study section, or one of our own. But in spite of the fact that it's tough to get grants from us, we still get our share of criticism.